



AIR CAMPAIGN

# EASTERN FRONT 1945

Triumph of the Soviet Air Force

WILLIAM E. HIESTAND | ILLUSTRATED BY JIM LAURIER



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# INTRODUCTION

An Il-2M2 Shturmovik ready for a mission. The most produced and famous Soviet aircraft of the war, the heavily armored Il-2M2 provided powerful support to the series of Red Army offensives that drove the Wehrmacht to the Vistula in late 1944. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via [www.Stavka.photos](http://www.Stavka.photos))

The Red Army launched a series of massive offensives across Poland and East Prussia in 1945, and after five months of brutal fighting ultimately fought its way into the ruins of Berlin. The Soviet military machine that won these victories had become a true combined arms force, using firepower and mechanization to smash through Axis defenses and launch deep exploitation operations that rivaled those of the early-war Wehrmacht. The Soviet Air Force, the *Voyenno-vozdushnye sily* (VVS), was a key component of this war machine. The VVS had suffered crippling losses in the early months of the war but had battled the Luftwaffe to a standstill in 1942 and 1943. Improved aircraft and aircrew allowed Soviet airmen to play a vital role supporting the 1944 offensives that destroyed entire German army groups and drove the Wehrmacht from the USSR and the Balkans. In January 1945, the air armies of the VVS were poised on the Vistula River with the Red Army's powerful fronts, ready for the final assault into Germany.

The Luftwaffe, crippled by years of grinding attrition and forced to spread its dwindling squadrons between multiple fronts, could only hope that its small but potent force of jet fighters and other new technology weapons would stem the tide. Although German jet operations against the USAAF and RAF receive much attention in postwar accounts of the Luftwaffe's last months, the vast majority of its sorties in 1945 would actually be flown on the Eastern Front as aircraft and scarce fuel were shifted to face the final Soviet offensives. German pilots, many still flying outdated Bf 109s and Ju 87s, would even briefly claw back air superiority from the VVS in February before fighting to the end over Berlin.

This volume describes the final clashes of Soviet and German airmen as Zhukov's, Konev's, and Rokossovsky's fronts battled to the Oder in January 1945, cleared their northern and southern flanks in February and March, and launched the final assault on Berlin in April. The Red Army offensives of 1945 shaped the history of the second half of the 20th century, securing Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe and sealing the division of the continent into communist and free world alliances. Soon after the war, the USSR would begin to equip its units with new jet fighters, long-range bombers, and nuclear weapons, and a decade later

the Luftwaffe would be reborn as part of a new anti-communist Western alliance. The Soviet doctrine for the aviation operations that won the Battle for Berlin, now paired with nuclear weapons, would threaten NATO forces for decades to come.

## ORIGINS

In the spring of 1944, Hitler's Germany could still nurse hopes of averting ultimate defeat. The Wehrmacht held Western Europe, much of Italy, and the Baltic States and Belorussia in the USSR. In France, Hitler massed his ground forces in hopes of repelling the expected Allied invasion across the Channel. The Luftwaffe fielded 4,500 combat aircraft – roughly the number in the force at the start of Operation *Barbarossa* in 1941 – and hoped that the revolutionary Me 262 jet fighter and other new weapons in development would allow it to regain its former competitive edge. Under pressure to ward off the Allied bombing offensive, the Luftwaffe starved the Eastern Front of aircraft, planning to surge aircraft to prepared airfields in France when the Allies landed.

Instead, 1944 brought a series of disastrous defeats that dashed German hopes. USAAF strategic bombers began a renewed daylight assault on the Reich in the spring, this time with its bombers escorted by long-range P-51 Mustang and P-47 Thunderbolt fighters that inflicted heavy attrition on the German fighter force. The Allied invasion of France in 1944 rapidly overwhelmed what opposition the Luftwaffe could offer, and the subsequent Allied breakout and drive to the German border overran much of its air defense radar network. In the East, the Red Army destroyed Army Group Center in Belorussia and cut off and isolated Army Group North on the Courland Peninsula. To the south, Soviet forces launched a series of offensives into the Balkans that seized Rumania and Bulgaria, then turned north and in December encircled and laid siege to Budapest. A US bomber offensive aimed at Germany's synthetic oil plants



Soviet aircraft over a tank column in 1943. By 1945, even the USSR was running short of troops to hurl unsupported at German machine guns, and the Soviet army relied heavily on firepower in the form of artillery, air support, and tanks to improve its combat power and limit infantry casualties. (Print Collector via Getty Images)



An Il-2M Shturmovik over Budapest. Hitler paid great attention to operations in Hungary throughout the last months of the war, and two relief operations were launched in attempts to relieve the encircled city before Budapest fell to Soviet attack in February 1945. The 5th Air Army under General Sergey Goryunov supported the 2nd Ukrainian Front throughout the campaign. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group Editorial via Getty Images)

reduced monthly production from 175,000 tons early in the year to only 12,000 tons in September 1944. With the loss of the Ploesti oilfields to the Soviet offensive in the Balkans, Hitler's military faced severe fuel shortages. In total, 1944 had cost Germany almost one-and-a-half million casualties, and its Bulgarian, Rumanian, and Finnish allies had been driven out of the war.

The autumn of 1944 brought a measure of German recovery. In the West, logistical problems, weather, difficult terrain, and the Siegfried Line fortifications on the German border bogged down the Allied advance. In the East, the Soviet offensive across Poland had stalled at the Vistula, and German forces were able to brutally suppress the Warsaw Uprising just across the river. Hitler, searching for a means to shake the Allied alliance, marshaled all available reserves and struck the thin US line in the Ardennes Forest in December, the scene of the Wehrmacht's Blitzkrieg victory in May 1940. Within several weeks it was clear that German forces would never cross the Meuse River and threaten the port of Antwerp. The Luftwaffe had marshaled its limited fuel to support the offensive and launched Operation *Bodenplatte* (Baseplate), a surprise attack by over 800 fighters against enemy airbases in the West, in the early hours of January 1, 1945. Although it inflicted significant damage, the Luftwaffe suffered heavily during the attack, especially to its dwindling ranks of experienced pilots, while the Allies were able to rapidly replace their losses.

The Eastern Front was starved of reinforcements in early 1945 as Hitler sought success in the West. Chief of the OKH General Staff General Heinz Guderian pressed the Fuhrer to strengthen the vulnerable line on the Vistula with divisions withdrawn from the Courland Peninsula, Norway, and the Western Front, but Hitler dismissed intelligence reports of a Soviet buildup as "the greatest bluff since Ghenghis Khan." Guderian was bluntly told the Eastern Front would have to look after itself. In reality, Stalin and his General Staff were completing a massive buildup and planning nothing less than an offensive designed to break through German defenses, cross the Polish plain, and assault Berlin within weeks. Stalin planned to attack on January 20, but in response to a request from Churchill to advance the date to take pressure off the Allies in the Ardennes, agreed to begin eight days earlier despite forecasts of poor flying weather.

German Army A-4 ballistic missiles in launch position. Hitler and his leaders hoped that new technology weapons would turn the tide of war in their favor in 1944 and 1945. Many of the systems were never fielded, and those that were had less impact than anticipated. Almost all, with the exception of the Mistel Composite bomber, were used almost exclusively against the Western Allies. (Roger Viollet via Getty Images)



# CHRONOLOGY

## 1944

**Spring 1944** A renewed offensive by US heavy bombers, now escorted by long-range fighters, cripples the German fighter force.

**Summer–fall 1944** A series of Allied offensives from the south, east, and west destroy whole army groups; Allied forces drive to the German frontier in the West, northern Italy in the south, and to the Vistula River in Poland. Soviet forces overrun the Balkans, capturing the Rumanian oilfields at Ploesti. US bombers attack and cripple Germany's synthetic oil plants.

**December 16** The Ardennes counteroffensive begins. Hitler sends his rebuilt strategic reserve into an attack in the West, asserting that the reported buildup against his forces on the Eastern Front is a "gigantic bluff." The Ardennes offensive soon loses momentum.

## 1945

**January 1** The Luftwaffe launches Operation *Bodenplatte* against Allied airfields in the West. The attackers achieve surprise, but they suffer heavily while the Allies rapidly replace their losses.

**January 12–14** In response to a request from Churchill, Stalin advances the start of the planned Vistula–Oder offensive in the east from January 20 to the 12th. Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front attacks on the 12th and Zhukov's 1st Belarussian Front two days later. Poor weather initially limits Soviet air support by the attached 2nd and 16th Air Armies, but they soon add their weight to the assault. Soviet forces penetrate the thin German defensive lines and the advancing tank armies, supported by Shturmoviks and fighters, rapidly exploit to the west.

**January 13** Chernyakovsky's 3rd Belarussian Front attacks into East Prussia supported by the 1st Air Army but encounters heavy resistance; Rokossovsky's 2nd Belarussian Front and attached 4th Air Army attack the next day to Chernyakovsky's south.

**January 16** With the clearing weather, the Soviets are able to launch large numbers of sorties, overwhelming the aircraft sent up by Luftflotte 6. Chernyakovsky and Rokossovsky finally break through German resistance with heavy air support from their 1st and 4th Air Armies.



The MiG-3 was an early war design that proved unsatisfactory due to its poor performance in the low-altitude engagements common on the Eastern Front. Numbers were retained for reconnaissance, sent to Naval Aviation, or retained by the PVO Strany air defense forces where their good high-altitude capabilities were more useful. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via [www.Stavka.photos](http://www.Stavka.photos))

**January 17** Warsaw is taken by Soviet and Polish forces supported by the Polish 4th Mixed Air Division. After the successful breakthrough on the Vistula, Stavka assigns more ambitious objectives to Zhukov and Konev, who are directed to seize bridgeheads over the Oder River and prepare for a February attack on Berlin.

**January 17–February 2** The 1st Belarussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts drive rapidly across Poland, led by tank armies supported by fighters and Shturmoviks overhead. Zhukov clears Lodz and drives towards the Oder River, while Konev takes Krakow and maneuvers the Germans out of the Silesian industrial zone, capturing its network of factories and mines largely intact. Soviet forces liberate Auschwitz on January 27. By February 2, the Soviets are on the Oder and less than 100km from Berlin, although VVS units have difficulty establishing forward bases and keeping up with the advance.

**January 20** Although Chernyakovsky has finally broken through, reports of his initial slow progress lead the Soviet high command to divert Rokossovsky's 2nd Belarussian

Front to strike north and cut off German forces in East Prussia, leaving Zhukov's right flank uncovered.

**January–February** In response to the Vistula–Oder offensive, the Luftwaffe high command strips much of its force in the West and from the homeland air defenses to reinforce General Robert Ritter von Greim's Luftflotte 6, the major formation on the Eastern Front. Some 650 fighters and 100 fighter bombers arrive to augment the defense of the Oder River. The bulk of Luftwaffe air operations for the rest of the war will be on the Eastern Front.

Soviet forces are diverted by the need to encircle and eliminate a variety of cities designed as fortresses by Hitler. Königsberg survives its first siege by the 3rd Belarussian Front, while four of Chuikov's 8th Guards Army's eight divisions take Posen on February 22.

**Early February** Logistical shortfalls, increased German resistance, blizzards, and warming temperatures bring the Soviet offensive to a halt on the Oder. Luftflotte 6, now reinforced, is able to operate from well-equipped permanent airbases in Germany and seizes temporary air superiority over the front. The VVS struggles to operate from improvised airfields reduced to quagmires by the thaw. Luftwaffe fighter bombers, reinforced by air defense fighters taken from the Reich, play a major role in halting the Soviet offensive and retaining



Marshal Zhukov, center, consults with Konev on the right during the fighting around Kursk in 1943. As the Soviet forces drove into central Europe the numerous front organizations were consolidated into fewer, more powerful units. Marshals Zhukov and Konev, the USSR's leading military commanders and fierce rivals, led the 1st Belarussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts during the drive from Warsaw to Berlin in the last months of the war. (mil.ru/Wikimedia Commons)

German bridgeheads over the Oder at Kustrin and Frankfurt.

**February 4–10** Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill meet at Yalta to arrange for the conclusion of the war and to settle the division of Germany.

**February 8–24** Stalin and his high command determine to clear the northern and southern flanks before launching an offensive over the Oder against Berlin. From February 8–24, Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front and its supporting 2nd Air Army conduct the Lower Silesian Operation and advance to the Neisse River southeast of Berlin. Breslau is surrounded but holds out until May 6, with the Luftwaffe struggling to land and air-drop supplies.

**February 15–21** The Germans launch Operation *Sonnenwende* (Solstice) against Zhukov's weakly held northern flank, uncovered due to Rokossovsky's diversion north to cut off East Prussia. The attack is supported by elements of Greim's Luftflotte 6, but soon bogs down.

**February 24–March 4** Zhukov and Rokossovsky are ordered to attack into Pomerania to secure Zhukov's northern flank. The 1st Belarussian Front reaches the Baltic coast and secures the northern Oder, while the 2nd Belarussian Front attacks north and then east towards Danzig.

**March 4** The Luftwaffe restricts fighter operations against the Allied strategic bomber offensive to jets; fuel reserves are now diverted to the Eastern Front.

**March 15–31** Konev makes limited gains in a second operation aimed at clearing Upper Silesia.

**March 18–31** Tensions at Fuhrer conferences over holding the Kustrin bridgehead on the Oder lead to command changes. Hitler agrees to replace the ineffective Himmler as commander of Army Group Vistula with the capable General Henrici. Guderian, however, is removed as Chief of the OKH staff ten days later. Kustrin falls to a Soviet attack lasting from March 28–31.

**March–April** The Luftwaffe prioritizes flying supplies into isolated fortresses and striking the bridges over the Oder River. A sustained but largely unsuccessful assault on the Oder River bridges ensues, with most attacks being made by Mistel composite bombers.

**March 31** The bridge at Steinau supplying Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front near Breslau is hit and severely damaged by Mistel attack.

**April 1** Concerned by the increased pace of Allied advances in the West, Stalin calls his marshals to Moscow to plan the capture of Berlin.

**April 2–10** Marshal Aleksandr Vasilevsky's 3rd Belarussian Front storms and captures Königsberg, supported by a powerful aviation force including three air armies and Baltic Fleet aviation controlled by VVS commander Marshal Aleksandr Novikov. On April 7, 516 bombers of the 18th Air Army launch an unusual daylight attack, escorted by 125 fighters, to smash the city center.

**April 16–18** The Berlin offensive begins. Zhukov's 1st Belarussian Front is stalled in front of Henrici's defenses on the Seelow Heights, while Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front rapidly crosses the Neisse River and exploits towards Berlin from the south over the next several days.

**April 16** The Luftwaffe launches a Mistel attack that damages the rail bridge at Kustrin; sporadic attacks on the Oder bridges will continue until the end of the month.

**April 19** Zhukov's 1st Belarussian Front breaks through the German defenses on the Seelow Heights with the aid of intense air support from Rudenko's 16th Air Army and the 18th Air Army's long-range bombers.

**April 20** Soviet forces reach Berlin's suburbs. Rokossovsky's 2nd Belarussian Front begins its offensive to Zhukov's north, with his attached 4th Air Army playing a major role as his artillery is still in the process of moving forward after the conclusion of the Pomeranian operation.

**April 24** Luftflotte 6 commander General von Greim is called to Hitler's bunker, promoted to field marshal, and appointed commander of the Luftwaffe. Elements of the German 9th and 4th Panzer Armies are surrounded to the southeast of Berlin and neutralized by sustained Soviet air attacks by elements from the 2nd and 16th Air Armies over the next week.

**April 24–25** Berlin is struck by 111 bombers from the 18th Air Army on the 24th, followed the next day by a raid by 563 bombers.



VVS fighters at a field airstrip with camouflage netting covering some of the parking area. The Soviet military placed a major emphasis on *maskirovka* – camouflage, concealment, and deception – activities. (Nik Cornish at [www.Stavka.photos](http://www.Stavka.photos))

**April 25** Berlin is fully encircled by Zhukov's and Konev's forces. Elements of the Soviet 5th Guards Army and US 1st Army meet on the Elbe River near Torgau. The 16th Air Army launches two massive attacks on German positions in Berlin, the first with 949 aircraft (463 bombers, 486 fighters) and the second with 589 (267 bombers, 322 fighters).

**April 28** Tempelhof Airfield on the outskirts of Berlin is taken by Soviet forces and rapidly used by VVS fighter units. The Luftwaffe is reduced to scattered supply drops to Berlin and landings on improvised road strips by light liaison planes.

**April 30** Hitler commits suicide and troops of the Soviet 150th Rifle Division raise the Red Banner over the Reichstag.

**May 2** The Soviets storm the Reich Chancellery and the Berlin garrison surrenders.

**May 4** German forces in northwest Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark surrender.

**May 6** Breslau surrenders.

**May 8–9** German forces surrender throughout Europe; the last scattered engagements between Luftwaffe and Soviet aircraft take place on the 8th and 9th.

**May 11** Fighting dies out in Prague.

**July 17** The Potsdam Conference begins.



# ATTACKER'S CAPABILITIES

## The VVS on the brink of victory

Stalin famously called the Il-2M Shturmovik as necessary to the Red Army "as air and bread," and its low-level cannon, bomb, and rocket attacks on German forces were the critical component of the VVS's air offensive doctrine. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via [www.Stavka.photos](http://www.Stavka.photos))

The Soviet Air Force suffered shattering losses in the first weeks of the war with Germany, and during 1942 had only been able to battle the qualitatively superior Luftwaffe by throwing in thousands of aircraft and poorly trained pilots to hold the line. The tide began to turn in 1943 as improved Soviet aircraft and more capable pilots began to grind down their outnumbered and overextended opponents. The USSR produced 28,984 combat aircraft in 1943 and 32,649 the next year, with a heavy emphasis on fighters and Il-2M Shturmoviks. By 1945, the VVS was a massive force ready to provide powerful support to Red Army offensives. In January, VVS frontal aviation consisted of 14,046 combat aircraft, 12,868 of which were newer models, including 3,330 bombers, 4,171 ground attack aircraft, 5,810 fighters, and 735 reconnaissance and artillery spotting aircraft. French and Czech squadrons and a Polish air division were integrated into the force structure, and 200 now-allied Rumanian and Bulgarian aircraft flew with the Soviets south of the Carpathians. Soviet Naval Aviation aircraft operated on the coastal axes, and the long-range bomber force, reorganized in December 1944 as the 18th Air Army, operated a small number of four-engine bombers and over 700 medium bombers. The Stavka high command held an additional 575 aircraft in several reserve air corps, ready to be dispatched to the front for major offensives.

### The air offensive

The story of the VVS in the last years of the war is essentially the story of the air offensive – the concentrated application of Soviet air power to support breakthrough and exploitation operations by ground forces. During the entire war, 46.5 percent of air army combat sorties were attacks on enemy forces on or near the battlefield, and a large portion of the remainder were escort operations by covering fighter units or bomber raids on targets close to the front. Unlike Western air forces, strategic bombing and deep interdiction operations were extremely rare and there was little effort to conduct sustained attacks on enemy airbases or fighter